Office of the President

“Rootedness and Restlessness,” Campus Community Address, November 2014

November 1, 2014

The past five months have been one of compelling discovery for me–discovery of an institution whose values exemplify the best ideals of a 21st century liberal education. That institution I discovered is Middlebury, and it has been built, maintained, and nurtured by you, the members of the community sitting before me, and whom I am greatly excited to meet. Please do not be shy. Please find me today and introduce yourself. Don’t worry that you may have to introduce yourself again next year, because that will simply be another occasion we can look forward to with joy.

The first way you can get to know me is to know that I innocently came to Middlebury last February to give a lecture on liberal arts in the global age. I had no idea you were looking for a president. So much for innocently giving a lecture! Let me share again with you those ideas I shared on the fateful day in February.

I define liberal arts education in the 21st century with three key words: innovation, adaptation, and integration. Innovation is not only the capacity to discover new laws of nature and society. It can also be defined, and I think well defined, as a change that creates new meaning for the stakeholders in a culture. Our innovations therefore are, in the re-mix, information laden culture we now live in, as much in new combinations of information, of data, of social networks as in the discovery of new laws of nature. Both forms of discovery are important for innovation to occur. We research into and about databases, and thoughtful consideration of the economies of scale in data collection. Such kinds of innovation are a skill which our students need to make everyday decisions in their lives.

The second word is adaptation. Adaptation is not only the ability to be flexible, but the ability to imagine ways of thinking and working and living that have never existed before. On the one hand, this is a major challenge. It is a challenge because of what Tom Friedman called the need for "The Start up of You." Students today need to respond to changing conditions more quickly than ever before. When students graduate from college, they increasingly must create their own worlds—their own forms of employment, their own ways of being in the world. And so adaptation becomes a paramount skill; indeed a crucial one in a world where everyday decisions have consequences that we can predict less and less. In the best of liberal arts, we teach our students to imagine those ways of thinking and working.

And finally, we have integration. Integration is not only the ability to put things together, to make new connections, but also to find new ways in which knowledge fits into the world. We live in a world in which the discreet, silo-ed forms of knowledge remain some of the most powerful driving forces in our lives. Fields of knowledge confer identity, even on our undergraduates as they try to decide their major. Our students are constantly trying to pull those discreet forms of knowledge into a single whole. And if that process of integration does not occur, young people are left with a kind of incoherent life, a jumbled story to tell about their lives that they do not want to tell. As educators, we need to help students learn to make those connections, and make their knowledge fit, as they build their lives.

Every institution must exemplify these educational goals of innovation, adaptation, and integration in its own unique way. And as I came to learn more about Middlebury, I saw that I was getting to know an institution that has exemplified these goals powerfully, creatively, and energetically.

Here is my list of what is so powerful about Middlebury in light of those three terms. I have come to call this list the seven great educational virtues of Middlebury. Because I am a scholar of religion I must hasten to add that I am sure we will also discover the seven vices, but let us revel in the virtues on the occasion of today's joyful moment!

First, I noticed in many places in the materials I was sent the startling phrase: "long tradition of innovation." This phrase indicates to me that Middlebury tells its own history by accounting for the changes it makes as well as the virtues it preserves. This is a kind of dynamism that is baked into the habits of the college, not just a superficial descriptor. I learned that this is the place that taught activist and explorer Edwin P. James, class of 1813, to defend Native Americans and reject

slavery, and to learn the Ojibwe language. This is the place where adaptation and change is a very old habit.

Second, I noticed that in its mission statement Middlebury has the distinction of placing environmental stewardship at its center. This to me indicates that Middlebury has figured out the relationship between a sense of place and a sense of educational mission in the liberal arts. A sense of place has always been an asset to a college, but it is now, in 2014, a moral obligation to the environment as well. Middlebury's environmental studies programs and its new School of the Environment are not designed in the abstract: they teach students that here, place matters, that as Wendell Berry once put it in a talk, "Here, in this place, I become who I am meant to be."

Third, I have been deeply struck by the fact that Middlebury's commitment to rootedness is in creative tension with a commitment to restlessness–a key definition of the global liberal arts in the 21st century. By this I mean more than the wonderful fact that 60 percent of its students study abroad. I mean that it has had the wisdom to create an advisory board for each of its Schools Abroad–and therefore a community of oversight which guarantees stability of these schools. Such stability, a tradition since the founding of the first language school in 1915, also guarantees that students will always imagine themselves as travelers. As Middlebury graduate and infectious disease specialist, MacArthur award winner Jill Seaman knows as she works in the Sudan: to imagine oneself as a traveler is a deep 21st century intellectual virtue.

Fourth, I have noticed the role of writing, language, and translation at Middlebury is not only part of its vision of the liberal arts but also it's reaching out to the world. Since the Bread Loaf School of English, Bread Loaf Writers Conference and the Language Schools are jewels in Middlebury's crown, they could stay stagnant. But instead they too have gone global, they too have multiple campuses, and they too reinvent themselves every summer as the world pours into Middlebury and Middlebury pours into the world. In this process of discernment I have asked many people what they love of Middlebury. And several of them have responded, "In the summer, when you walk into a coffee shop, or are hiking on a trail, you simply never know what language you are going to run into."

Fifth, even with these jewels in writing and languages at Middlebury, there is balance and commitment to all forms of knowledge. It seems to me no accident that the study of economics and neuroscience are some of Middlebury's top majors, or that the visual and performing arts are

thriving. That fact suggests to me that at Middlebury there is exactly the kind of balance we need in the 21st century. That balanced underscores the power of the integration of knowledge that is a fundamental value of the liberal arts. In Middlebury's natural intellectual balance also includes the balance of body and mind—the vibrant athletics of all seasons that Middlebury is known for. In the past few months I have learned about people like Chris Waddell, the Middlebury grad who never stopped after a skiing accident in college and went on to be a decorated Paralympic skier. Such people exemplify the adaptive qualities that are an integral part of this Middlebury culture, and they are teachers of that great balance of body and mind.

Sixth, faculty and staff at Middlebury have started on a journey with Monterey Institute for International Studies that has both inspired and challenged them. I have been already impressed by the openness with which faculty and administrators from both campuses have engaged with this wonderful new asset, complementing as it does the Middlebury campus and continuing to create new models for Masters' degrees which have a sophisticated approach to global education. Monterey around the world is already known as a place of translation—scholars and teachers who translate the best international knowledge into the best policy for the world.

Seventh, the board of trustees has been highly adaptive in its structural reorganization. I have listened to board members as they think through the relationships between the new committees and the components that now make up Middlebury. There is nothing more exhilarating than working with a group of people who care about higher education and who are fellow travelers with us, especially if they are, as I have already found Middlebury's to be, restless, engaged, and visionary on behalf of the institution.

In short, after thinking about these seven virtues, I can't wait to get here. I will be delighted to be following and hope to be deepening the legacy of an extraordinary leader, Ron Liebowitz. I can't wait to listen and learn more, to dive into our deepest challenges and have our best arguments. I want to sit and talk to students where they live and learn. I am excited to weave an even greater fabric of teaching and scholarship with its dedicated faculty. I am eager to engage with alumni and friends to explore new ideas and to ensure that Middlebury has the resources to pursue its ambitions. I am delighted to begin work as your 17th president, because here, in all the glorious places where Middlebury lives and thrives, we will become together who we are meant to be.

Thank you.